Chapter 1

The Study of Mystical Experiences

The modern study of mysticism was begun in the late nineteenth century when medical psychologists noted that phenomena resembling those recorded of Christian mystics were being produced by inmates of mental asylums.[1] To defend the sanity of the saints, Catholic and Anglican apologists mounted counteroffensives along two fronts. One was *literary.* The historical mystics were studied, explained, and made to serve as precedents for modern theologies of mysticism. The second front was *experiential,* but there was no living tradition within Western Christianity on which to draw. Mysticism had been in disrepute since the turn toward science and rationalism two centuries earlier. The mysticism that was available in Europe in the late nineteenth century consisted, in the main, of practices that had been imported from India in the interim. Yoga was what the apologists knew, and the aspects of Christian mysticism that they understood best were those that most closely resembled Hindu Yoga. The apologists were not content, however, to acknowledge that other historical mystics were beyond their comprehension. Yoga rapidly became a Proscrutean bed for the interpretation of Christian mystics without exception. Thomas Merton, for example, made St. Bernard of Clairvaux read like Patanjali.[2]

The debate between mysticism's detractors and apologists needlessly polarized research. It is no accident that the greatest of Western mystics were among the most insightful psychologists of their religious traditions: Augustine and Teresa, Maimonides, and ibn al-ʿArabi. Success in the practice of mysticism requires competence in its psychological understanding. It was in order to perfect their experiences that the mystics kept abreast of, and often contributed originally to the front line of, psychological research in their eras and cultures.

Because most students of mysticism have neglected to acquire an equivalent competence in psychology, the historical existence of

Western mystical practices that differ significantly from Yoga went unsuspected for decades. The sophistication of William James's observations were ignored and misrepresented.[3] A generation of scholars maintained that despite superficial differences, mysticism is everywhere one and the same. Evelyn Underhill suggested that "mysticism, in its pure form, is . . . the science of union with the Absolute, and nothing else, and . . . the mystic is the person who attains this union."[4] Underhill's effort to translate a type of religiosity into a discrete psychological state was widely imitated. Prophets,[5] spirit mediums,[6] and shamans[7] were each defined by reference to a distinctive religious experience. The general paradigm was tidy, but it flew in the face of the facts.

The Diversity of Mystics' Experiences

The idea that mystics must conform with a modern definition of mysticism, or are not to be counted as mystics, is a criterion for assessing authentic and inauthentic mysticism. It privileges certain experiences over against others. Mystical union has been treated as the essence of mysticism. Visions, by contrast, have occasionally been noted, but have regularly been treated as an afterthought, an addendum, a peripheral concern.

Important as normative value-judgments may be for theologians, they express sectarian desiderata for the future. They are not impartial descriptions of the past. Historians, who define mysticism on historical principles, must instead consider the actual practices of people who have traditionally been considered mystics (pneumatics, kabbalists, sufis, yogis, and others). What the mystics of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam traditionally or presently consider to be mystical, may not be a sufficient or complete account of mysticism. But no approach to mysticism that is less extensive can pretend to adequacy. Mysticism may entail more than what the traditionally recognized mystics have practiced, but it certainly encompasses nothing less. With saints and sinners, the orthodox, heterodox, and heretical, normative and eccentric, mainstream and marginal all counted in together, we find a tremendous diversity among mystical experiences.

Comparative perspectives are not necessary to establish this point. Consider the evidence of Western Christianity alone. In his discussion of "The Paradise or Third Heaven Seen by St. Paul,"[8] St. Augustine of Hippo introduced what subsequently became the authoritative Catholic distinction among three types of vision.

(1) The *corporeal vision* seems subjectively to be apparent to one or more of the bodily senses. The contents of the vision are seen against a background of sense perception. Corporeal visions include phenomena such as apparitions of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and various saints.

The following report was recorded by Church authorities within days after the sighting, in Spain in 1483.

> Praying on his knees he went to the door of the chapel, and after he prayed as God ordained and started to arise he heard within the chapel the lamentations of a little girl. The witness was very disturbed and surprised by the cries and sobs, and when he started to arise and ring the pardon the doors of the chapel, which, as he said, were locked, opened miraculously.
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> From his kneeling position the witness saw through the open doors, three or four paces within the chapel before him, a very beautiful girl between seven and eight years old, all dressed in clothes as white as the snow. She was continuously wringing her hands and with them joined she cried and asked for pity from Jesus Christ, beseeching him that it be his mercy and pity to take mercy and pity on his people. She was crying out loudly in a very sweet voice, and when the witness saw and heard her from his kneeling position, he made an effort to pull himself together, although he was very frightened, and questioned the girl with these or similar words: "O sweet child, will you tell me what is troubling you so?"
>
> The girl replied as follows: "O my son, I charge you by your soul to charge the souls of the men of the parishes. . . . "
>
> After the girl said all these words and things to the witness she disappeared, and he saw nothing more except that the doors of the chapel closed and locked themselves as miraculously as they had opened, with the witness still on his knees in the doorway. Then the witness stood up and went home.[9]

(2) The *interior vision* is apparent only to the mind. It is also termed the *imaginative vision* in reference to the medieval understanding of imagination as a faculty that is limited to the fanciful combination of elements of perceptual memory. The term signifies that the visions are understood during or following their occurrence as intrapsychic events that proceed within the soul's faculty of imagination. Interior visions do not necessarily seem imaginary in the sense of fictitious. Mystics may instead regard them as valid revelations, or as extrasensory perception.

Interior visions are dreamlike experiences that may involve images, beings, sceneries, events, and so forth. As in dreams, the mental presentations consist primarily of visual images, but auditory or other sensory representations may occur as well. The following self-report is from *The Spiritual Dialogue* of St. Catherine of Genoa:

> One day there appeared to her inner vision Jesus Christ incarnate crucified, all bloody from head to foot. It seemed that the body rained blood. From within she heard a voice say, "Do you see this blood? It has been shed for your love, to atone for your sins." With that she received a wound of love that drew her to Jesus with such trust that it washed away all that previous fright, and she took joy in the Lord.[10]

Catherine appreciated that Jesus had not appeared to her bodily senses, but only to her soul. She had no doubt, however, that she beheld an objectively existing, external, supernatural being. At the same time, it is possible and perhaps probable that she regarded the rain of blood as an imaginative symbol of the "wound of love . . . that washed away" her fright.

The Catholic tradition gave individual names to a few subcategories of the interior vision. An interior vision in which the mystic's soul flies out of the body was termed a *transport,* while visions in which the body itself was seen to fly were understood as *levitation.* Some visions straddle the categories. When the discorporeal soul is transported out of its body, it may drag the decapitated corporeal head, or the decapitated head and then the body, along with it in its wake.[11] Levitation is popularly reputed to be a physical feat, rather than the content of a vision, because interior visions may reproduce the external physical environment so very completely that mystics mistake interior visions for corporeal ones.[12]

(3) The *intellectual vision* is again apparent only to the mind. It was defined with reference to the medieval understanding of the intellect, reason, or spirit—the medieval terms were synonymous—as a faculty that accomplishes abstract conceptual thinking. It is the only faculty that has access to metaphysical beings and phenomena. Intellectual visions sometimes consist of *locutions* or distinctly verbal ideas, and otherwise of nonverbal ideas or comprehensions.[13] Classic examples include the sense of presence (the spiritual betrothal), mystical union, and the prophetic inspiration of verbal ideas.

Augustine classified visions in conformance with the best understanding of psychology available in his day. He gave the psycho-

logical categories theological importance, by arguing that the bodily senses were less reliable than the mind, and the imagination less reliable than the intellect, in the apprehension of spiritual truths. In Augustine's theology, a spiritual being—God, an angel, or a demon—was rightly perceived as an imageless idea. Whenever the spiritual being was portrayed by the imagination as a dreamlike image, or by the senses as a corporeal apparition, it was apprehended less accurately, and the possibility of doctrinal error increased.

The historian of religions Ernst Arbman established that Augustine's categories are not discrete. What begins as a corporeal vision may continue as an interior vision and end as an intellectual one:

> One morning while praying in tongues I saw the cross in a red glow—everything was red, but there were two red beams coming down from the cross to two people. One was a lady in the hospital who had fallen down one flight in an elevator shaft and was in critical condition in the hospital. . . . The other was a dear friend of mine. I was told [internally, by God] to pray for these two people and did.[14]

Because the cross was a physical sense perception, its red glow may be considered a corporeal vision. When the mystic recognized two people who were known to be elsewhere, the vision was understood to be interior. By definition, however, the concluding locutions were intellectual.

The sequence of transformations is variable. The following self-report by Angela of Foligno describes a mystical experience that began as an intellectual vision but concluded as an interior one. Mystical union took vivid pictorial form:[15]

> When I am immersed in this good and contemplate it, I no longer recollect the humanity or incarnation of Jesus Christ, nor anything, whatever it might be, which has a form. Yet I see everything and see nothing. But when I leave this good, then I see the Man-God. And He draws me mildly to Himself all the time until He says: Thou art I and I am thou. I see His eyes and His countenance full of compassion. He embraces my soul and presses it to Him with an immense force.[16]

Also violating Augustine's categories are instances of the sense of presence, traditionally classed as an intellectual vision of an

unseen presence, which take palpable form as a corporeal vision.[17] Again, precisely the same image of Christ may occur to the same mystic, sometimes as a corporeal vision, and other times as an interior one.[18]

Although varieties of mystical experience that Augustine had not taken into consideration were interpreted by later Catholic writers as subdivisions within his categories, the fit was often inexact. Phenomena such as ecstatic preaching, prophesying, and glossolalia were categorized as the *spoken ecstasy.* Although it is pronounced with the bodily voice, the spoken ecstasy is considered a variety of intellectual vision because the bodily actions depend on the inspiration of verbal ideas.

The spoken ecstasy may occur alone. Alternatively, either an imaginative vision or a purely intellectual vision may occur immediately prior to, or during, the audible manifestation of the spoken ecstasy.[19] St. Catherine of Ricci provided a classic example. Every Thursday evening and Friday morning for twelve years she beheld the passion of Christ in a series of interior visions. The drama involved seventeen scenes from the Last Supper through the conclusion of the crucifixion. Within her visions, Catherine experienced herself either as Christ or alongside him. People in her physical environment saw her body assume the positions and gestures that she, as Christ, had in her interior visions. She spoke in a loud voice and misperceived people around her as fellow participants in the events of the passion. For their part, Catherine's companions respected her mystical experience sufficiently that they enacted their assigned roles.[20]

Unlike St. Catherine, who performed complete dramatic actions and spoke in a loud voice during her interior visions of Christ's passion, most passion mystics, such as St. Francoise Romaine and Mary of Moerl, were given only to limited pantomimic gestures and silence.[21] Theirs was a *mobile ecstasy,* but not a spoken one.

Closely akin to the spoken and mobile ecstasies and best considered as their literary equivalent is the experience that modern psychologists term "automatic writing." St. Teresa of Avila wrote many of her works, including poetic verse, very rapidly while in ecstatic states, by hearing intellectual visions distinctly and functioning as a copyist.[22] In other cases, the writing proceeded without the owner of the hand having an advanced notion as to what was about to be written. Sometimes the text was not comprehended even when it was complete.[23]

The spoken, mobile, and written ecstasies of Catholic mystics are all instances of what anthropologists term "spirit possession,"—

that is, positively valued experiences of involuntary bodily activity, which are attributed to the presence of spiritual beings.

Stigmata involve the involuntary rather than voluntary nervous system, but they too are related phenomena. When St. Catherine of Ricci alerted from her trance at the conclusion of her experience of the Passion, her body bore the marks of ropes, scourging, and the five stigmata:[24]

> Stigmatization . . . or more precisely the experience of having oneself personally suffered in the nailing of Jesus to the cross . . . is a well-documented, shockingly realistic ecstatic dream, experienced by the mystic from beginning to end in every detail and with all his senses in exactly the same way as an actual crucifixion and having an innate suggestive power sufficient to give rise to the marks of the wounds on hands, feet and in the side that were inflicted on the Saviour when He was crucified.[25]

The diversity of Catholic mystics' experiences is consistent with mystics' experiences elsewhere. It is absurd to contrast ecstatic religious traditions, such as shamanism, mediumship, prophetism, and mysticism, on the basis of distinctions among religious experiences. People everywhere are able to experience all possible types of religious experience. The world's ecstatic religious traditions tend to accommodate a tremendous diversity of personal experiences. Conformity is required in matters of doctrine much more than experience. Indeed, the vagueness or nonspecificity of many traditional doctrines, which has so complicated modern research, arises precisely from the need for formulations that may be applied simultaneously to diverse religious experiences.

Ecstatic religious traditions do generally favor certain experiences over against others. However, the favoritism is not the product of access to certain varieties of experience, as distinct from others. Conscious choices are made for a variety of historical factors: ideological, socio-political, economic, ecological, and so forth.

This circumstance has important consequences for historians. If the "common core" hypothesis were correct that mystical experiences are everywhere one and the same, it would no more be possible to write a history of mysticism than a history of sense perception. Histories would be restricted to beliefs and theories (philosophies, theologies, and so forth) about mysticism, but mysticism as such would be a topic for psychologists.

Because mystical experiences are various, however, it is possible to write a history of the very practice of mysticism. Just as

complex mystical doctrines must be learned in order to be transmitted, so too must techniques for the induction and direction or control of mystical experiences. Choices among techniques influence the content of the resultant experiences and so contribute to mystics' doctrines. Refering to Buddhism, Conze remarked: "each and every [philosophical] proposition must be considered in reference to its spiritual intention and as a formulation of meditational experiences acquired in the course of the process of winning salvation."[26] With appropriate adjustments to different religions' goals, the same program of research may be applied cross-culturally. Historians must, however, possess an expertise in the psychology of mysticism that is at least equal to that of the mystics, if this research program is to proceed; but there is no valid reason that it should not.

As though to rationalize their neglect of the psychology of ecstasy, many scholars have expressed doubt as to the possibility of discussing the mystics' experiences on the basis of the textual evidence. Their studies purport to discuss mystics' doctrinal formulations; but because words have meaning only in the context of their referents, a study of mystical doctrines in isolation of mystical experiences is necessarily uncertain. It cannot assess whether a discussion refers to experienced realities, learned opinions, or completely mistaken speculations. It may not even be able to decide whether a term is to be understood at face value or metaphorically. A number of Islamicists have consequently recognized that they are studying not mystical theologies, but mystical semantics. The translation of the study of mysticism into a study of semiotics is, however, of little relevance either to mystics or to their historical study.

Again, it is emphatically not adequate to allege the presence of mysticism on the basis of doctrines or semantics that exhibit unitive turns of thought. Unitive thinking is a universal human tendency. It may erupt into consciousness during a mystical experience, but it may also occur during normal waking sobriety. Classic examples include the antireligious but extremely unitive sociologies of Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim.

What, in my opinion, finally distinguishes mystics from other types of religious ecstatic is their standing in society. Shamans, mediums, and prophets are public social functionaries who act on behalf their coreligionists in contacting their gods or spirits. Coreligionists may perform similar practices for personal or private reasons. For example, Plains Indians who were not shamans often engaged in vision quests. Many African and Afro-American religions

engage in group spirit possessions. The Old Testament records group prophesying in Canaanite and north Israelite religion. These individuals should not be considered mystics, however, because they needed only to acquire public followings in order to become shamans, mediums, or prophets.

The social circumstance of mystics differs. Mystics have no public social authority. Neither have they the possibility of acquiring any. Most of the world's mystics belong to religions that invest authority in scriptures and their interpreters. Mystics sometimes also occur in oral religions where authority is firmly invested in ritual (for example, classical Greece, earliest Taoism). In all cases, mystics' religions deny public authority to religious experiences. This social circumstance impacts on the resultant experiences. In order to avoid conflict with their religions' authorities, mystics tend to seek experiences of exclusively private concern. Private orientations may be achieved through religious experiences of many different types. Mystical union is merely one example. In all cases, it is the inward turn, due to the impossibility of possessing public religious authority, that I think to characterize mysticism wherever it is found.

Some Unitive Experiences

Mystical experiences are religious uses of otherwise secular alternate states of consciousness—or more precisely, alternate psychic states. What makes an alternate state experience a religious one is its personal or cultural valuation. A vision of Jesus, for example, is not intrinsically religious. It is necessary to believe in Jesus for the experience to be more than a secular hallucination.

As a brief synonym for "religiously interpreted alternate state experiences," I use the word *ecstasy.* In the English language, ecstasy has been a general cover term for prophetic, mystical, and poetic experiences since the seventeenth century.[27] It is used somewhat differently in other languages. In the writings of St. Teresa, which many Catholic writers follow, ecstasy names the final step of the *scala contemplationis.*[28] In psychological terms, Teresa wrote of ecstasy where we today would speak of deep trance. Her usage should not be endorsed, however, because other Catholic authorities—for example, St. Bernard of Clairvaux—wrote of ecstasies that did not involve a *scala contemplationis.*[29] Eliade's effort to equate "ecstasy" with out-of-the-body experiences[30] is still less

satisfactory; out-of-the-body experiences were traditionally termed "transports."

It is characteristic of all ecstasies that they involve at least some autonomous phenomena—what the Catholic tradition terms "contemplation" and contrasts with "meditation." Autonomous psychic materials seem subjectively to the ecstatic to be independent of control by will. The relationship between willful thinking and the autonomous materials is highly variable. Although all autonomous materials are passively received by consciousness, further passivity is not necessary to their occurrence. In the "concentrative meditation" on the *jhanas* in Mahayana Buddhism, for example, active discursive reasoning is resumed after each moment of autonomous development, until nirvana is reached.[31] Hasidic meditations that culminate in contemplations of *'ayin,* "naught," are similarly active until they climax in passivity.[32] The extent of mystical passivity has often been overestimated by mystics whose meditations are monotonous. With repeated performance, monotonous meditations become more or less automatic. Will is not required to make new decisions and mystics may quite forget that their ongoing meditations are mental activities. Passive in the face of habit, mystics may fantasize their complete passivity, which is by no means the case. Rather, the circumstance is analogous to a seated person who stands up and remains standing while conversing with another person. The continuation of standing proceeds automatically, but by no means passively.

Autonomous and autosuggested materials are mutually exclusive. Erika Fromm theorizes that " 'unbidden' imagery arises from the unconscious while 'bidden' imagery—as can be produced voluntarily by an act of attention—stems from the preconscious."[33] No philosophic prejudice should be attached to the terminology. What is unconscious is simply that which is not conscious. The term does not prejudge whether specific unconscious materials have their origin in biogenetic or constitutional endowment, experience and development, extrasensory perception (as Freud and Jung believed possible), or divine revelation.

In order to develop a crosscultural formulation that reflects the autonomy of contemplations, I define ecstasy as *any state of involuntary belief in the reality of the numinous.*[34] Like sense perception during normal waking sobriety and dream hallucinations during sleep, the autonomous contents of an ecstasy have a compelling psychic reality for at least the duration of their occurrence. The ecstatic is then convinced that the numinous is real—as real or more

real than the perceptible world. In contrast with sober faith in the numinous, which requires an act of will, ecstatic belief in the reality of the numinous is involuntary. Whether or not the occurrence of ecstasy was voluntarily sought, once the experience is underway faith in the reality of the numinous is not subject to volition. Doubt can be entertained, but it cannot be sustained for the duration of the experience. Uniquely among the varieties of religious experience, ecstasies have the power not only to confirm religious faith that already exists, but also to induce conversions from unbelief to belief.

The Catholic tradition is apparently unique among the world's mysticisms in distinguishing its types of vision from its *scala contemplationis,* "ladder of contemplation." The allusion to Jacob's ladder (Gen 28:12) refers to variations in the intensity or metaphoric "depth" of trance. This treatment of the ecstatic state and its content as independent variables is not paralleled, so far as I know, in other mystical traditions. The hierarchical sequences of the kabbalah, Sufism, Hindu Yoga, and Buddhist meditation list the contents of ecstasies. The intensity of trance is either ignored or treated as a dependent variable.

Catholic accounts of the *scala contemplationis* divide trance into a number of steps (e.g., four or seven) that commence with normal waking sobriety and culminate in intense states of trance. However, current scientific thinking endorses Ronald Shor's proposal that traditional concepts of trance depth confabulate what are in fact three independent factors.[35]

Shor described the first variable as a fading of the "general reality orientation."[36] It consists of a gradual and increasing inhibition of the normal functions of consciousness, beginning with reality-testing and will, and proceeding through sense perception, memory, and fantasy, to verbal and nonverbal thinking.[37] The repression of these ego functions permits ordinarily unconscious psychic functions to manifest autonomously in their place. Because the autonomous manifestations cannot be reality-tested, they are inevitably reified. For example, daydreams are converted into hallucinations, and speculative ideas into delusional certainties. Even though the autonomous manifestations may exhibit a "trance logic,"[38] their "special reality orientation" may seem valid at least for the duration of the trance.

The intensity of role-taking—or, to coin a term, creative elaboration—describes the extent to which autonomous materials are produced and elaborated. Are the manifestations simple and brief? Or are they richly detailed and protracted in time?

The third independent variable is the intensity of "archaic involvement"—or, to use older terms, "psychic depth"[39] or absorption. To what extent is self-observation maintained? Does emotional detachment prevail? Or are the autonomous materials subject to intense emotional involvement?

The contents of the trance state form a fourth category of independent variables. Every type of thought that the mind produces during wakefulness and sleep may occur during an ecstasy, but two types of ecstatic content warrant special attention. As *narrative ecstasies,* I refer to corporeal and imaginative visions, spoken and mobile ecstasies, and all comparable phenomena crossculturally. These ecstasies, whose scope corresponds to a modern understanding of fantasy, all have narrative storylines. The narrative may be extensive scenarios; in other cases, they may be brief: a single static visual tableau, a momentary gesture, an audible sound.

A second major category of ecstatic content may be described as *unitive.* Their study is surrounded by a lively debate. In highly polemic efforts to deny that psychedelic experiences can be mystical, R. C. Zaehner proposed that differences among mystics' doctrines reflect actual differences in the phenomenologies of their experiences.[40] Ninian Smart responded with the suggestion that mystical experiences differ from their interpretations by mystics both during their occurrence and after the experiences have ended.[41] H. P. Owen added that the mystics' beliefs, practices, and expectations contribute interpretive content to the experiences themselves.[42] A consensus has since been reached that personal, cultural, and universal factors are interwoven in mystical experiences much as they are in nocturnal dreams.[43] Religious ideology makes at least some contribution to the contents of all mystical experiences.[44]

Arbman went so far as to postulate a complete correspondence of mystical faith and mystical experience. He maintained that ecstasies convert religious ideas into religious experiences, but do nothing more:

> The ecstasy . . . can from the psychological point of view only be understood as a specific religious form of suggestive absorption in the complex of beliefs which in the state preceding it has constituted the sole, exclusive, or totally dominating object of the consciousness, and from which it may thus always be shown to derive its content and predetermined, strictly closed and organized visionary dream or experience.[45]

Arbman's argument proceeded from theory. His restriction to a phenomenological psychology made it necessary to account for ecstatic

experiences by reference to consciousness alone. Ecstasies had then to be products of previously held religious ideas.

Rather a different position was taken at the turn of the century by William James, who was willing to embrace the theory of the "subconscious":

> The mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own. It is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies, provided only they can find a place in the framework for its peculiar mood.[46]

James described mystics' philosophies and theologies as "overbeliefs." They are ideas that a person brings to a religious experience, not only postexperientially in the process of its interpretation and reportage, but also preexperientially as a contribution to the experiences' contents.[47]

Narrative ecstasies may perhaps be derived, as Arbman claimed, from religious beliefs that are entertained prior to the narratives' occurrence, but the unitive element in unitive experiences cannot be explained so simply. Autosuggestions are certainly involved. Meditation on the idea of God leads to union with God. Meditation on the idea of a chair leads to union with the chair. The Yogic practice of union with anything and everything, which is used to teach the illusory character of all, takes for granted that union is possible with any topic of meditation.[48] The same data indicate the inadequacy of Arbman's theory. Deikman showed experimentally that the act of staring at a vase, so far as possible without thinking anything further, suffices in some cases to induce a unitive experience.[49] The unitive idea that discovers self and all existence in the one vase is not part of the meditation, but is added to it in the process of its conversion into a passively received contemplation. Meditations involving Tantric mantras, Sufi *dhikr,* the Greek Orthodox Jesus prayer, and so forth, are similarly able to account for only some of the contents of the subsequent contemplations. Indeed, it is unlikely that mystics would believe in their experiences if they were nothing more than the products of autosuggestions.

The unitive ideas of unitive experiences are inherent in the structure of the ecstatic apperceptions. They are not topics of thought, but modes of thinking. The unitive ideas are thought *with,* rather than *about.* Just as, in seeing a tree, one knows immediately how far and large it is; so too, in having a unitive experience of the tree, one directly experiences its unity—for example, with self and

all existence. The unitive ideas are structures or lenses through which the ecstatic mind apperceives and orders whatever it may happen to think. The unitive ideas function in an automatic manner, outside consciousness, as its presuppositions.

Several varieties of unitive experience have been described as mystical union by different writers.[50] For present purposes, it will suffice to distinguish three types.

Introspective Union

The term *unio mystica,* mystical union, has most often been applied to the particular variety that Rudolf Otto described as "the Inward Way" or "Mysticism of Introspection."[51] The unitive experience is instanced in the following self-report by Mechthilde of Magdeburg:

> As He draws her to Himself, she gives herself to Him. She cannot hold back and so He takes her to Himself. Gladly would she speak but dares not. She is engulfed in the glorious Trinity in high union. He gives her a brief respite that she may long for Him. She would fain sing His praises but cannot. She would that He might send her to Hell, if only He might be loved above all measure by all creatures. She looks at Him and sayings, "Lord! Give me Thy blessing!" He looks at her and draws her to Him with a greeting the body may not know.[52]

Introspective union consists of a blissfully serene sense of timeless, boundless, and solitary uniqueness, in which self is the only existent. Introspective unions involve no experience of any actual union, uniting, or joining; neither is there a process in which subject-object distinctions disappear. There is simply and suddenly the experience that self is the unique or solitary existent, that the subject is infinite, eternal, and alone. Mystics who are theists experience introspective union as the selfhood of God. Postexperiential interpretations of the experience are much more various.

Extrovertive Union

Otto also noted a second type of unitive experience. He termed it "the Outward Way" because its "unifying Vision" apprehends the perceptible world. W. T. Stace called the outward way "extrovertive" mysticism.[53] An example may be seen in the following self-report by Angela of Foligno:

> And immediately the eyes of my soul were opened and I beheld the plenitude of God, whereby I did comprehend the whole world, both here and beyond the sea, and the abyss and all things else; and therein did I behold naught save the divine power in a manner assuredly indescribable, so that through excess of marvelling the soul cried with a loud voice, saying, "This whole world is full of God!" Wherefore did I now comprehend that the world is but a small thing; I saw, moreover, that the power of God was above all things, and that the whole world was filled with it.[54]

Extrovertive unions are the type of unitive experience that discover the one in the many. When its ideas are reified, extrovertive union may disclose that all are somehow one. In both events, the unitive element is a union that encompasses the perceptible cosmos in its full complexity.

Communion

A third type of unitive experience was identified by Abraham Joshua Heschel, who attributed classical biblical prophecy to an experience that he termed *unio sympathetica.*[55] Heschel's category was taken up by Gershom G. Scholem, who recognized its pertinence to kabbalists' experiences of communion (*devekut*).[56] The unitive ideas within the experience involve bonding with the divine in a dyadic "I-Thou" unit. There is a sense that two—not all, but two—are at one. A good example is provided by the continuation of Angela of Foligno's experience:

> Then said He unto me, "I have shown thee something of My power," the which I did so well understand that it enabled me better to understand all other things. He said also, "I have made thee to see something of My power; behold now and see Mine humility." Then was I given so deep an insight into the humility of God towards man and all other things that when my soul remembered His unspeakable power and comprehended His deep humility, it marvelled greatly and did esteem itself to be nothing at all, for in itself it beheld nothing save price.[57]

Henry Corbin suggested that interpretations of *unio mystica* as *unio sympathetica* are common in theosophical Sufism. Sufis who experience identity with God are obliged to conform their doctrinal understanding with Islam's teachings on prophecy, which involves a dialogic communion with God.[58]

In a discussion of American conversion experiences, Rodney Stark listed four types of experience. Each may occur alone or develop sequentially into the next. They all meet James's criteria for "the sense of presence,"[59] but only the last three involve the reciprocation by the presence that constitutes communion:

1) The human actor simply notes (feels, senses, etc.) the existence or presence of the divine actor.
2) Mutual presence is acknowledged, the divine actor is perceived as noting the presence of the human actor.
3) The awareness of mutual presence is replaced by an affective relationship akin to love or friendship.
4) The human actor perceives himself as a confidant of and/or a fellow participant in action with the divine actor.[60]

Johannes Lindblom noted an important difference between communion and introspective union. Communion experiences are a "personal mysticism" in which "the personality is preserved, both the personality of the divine and the personality of the religious man." The "impersonal mysticism" of introspective union is instead marked by a "complete oneness with the divine conceived of as a more or less impersonal substance."[61]

St. Teresa sometimes experienced the two phenomena as different phases of single ecstasies:

> There is the same difference between the Spiritual Betrothal [= communion] and the Spiritual Marriage [= introspective union] as there is between two betrothed persons and two who are united so that they cannot be separated anymore. . . . [In] the Betrothal. . . . the two persons are frequently separated, as is the case with union, for, although by union is meant the joining of two things into one, each of the two, as is a matter of common observation, can be separated and remain a thing by itself. . . . In the union of the Spiritual Marriage . . . the Lord appears in the centre of the soul. . . . the soul (I mean the spirit of this soul) is made one with God. . . . For He has been pleased to unite Himself with His creature in such a way that they have become like two who cannot be separate from one another. . . . the soul remains all the time in that centre with its God. We might say that union is as if the ends of two wax candles were joined so that the light they give is one.[62]

Teresa reported intellectual visions, but a transition from communion to union may also occur in a narrative ecstasy. Hadewijch,

a Flemish Beguine of the thirteenth century, reported the following experience:

> The eagle, who had previously spoken to me, said: "Now see through the Countenance, and become the veritable bride of the great Bridegroom, and behold yourself in this state!" And in that very instant I saw myself received in union by the One who sat there in the abyss upon the circling disk, and there I became one with him in the certainty of unity.[63]

Psychoanalytic theory explains the differences among the three types of unitive experiences in developmental terms. Communion is explained as an intense and prolonged experience of conscience.[64] The timeless, boundless, solitary bliss of introspective union is thought to depend, however, on memories of intrauterine life before birth, when the human fetus naively imagined itself to be the whole of existence.[65] The application of the same solipsistic assumption, shortly after birth, to the perceptible world is thought to underlie extrovertive unions.[66]

Due to the complexity of human development after birth, there are "a great variety of [extrovertive] mystic experiences according to the depth of regression."[67] In some cases, for example, the ecstatic has a sense of encompassing the entire cosmos. In others, the ecstatic feels a part of a cosmic whole. Others differ yet again.[68] Assuming, as I have suggested elsewhere,[69] that the regressive materials are developmentally early forms of conscience, we must be alert to the further aspects of unitive experiences: the willful thoughts and fantasies to which conscience is momentarily responding, the role of conscience in the life of the individual, and so forth. In all cases, "regression occurs together with the retention of a sense of identity" and "is not literally a return" to the infantile state.[70] Julia Kristeva explains:

> Overcoming the notion of irremediable separation . . . reestablishes a continuous fusion with an Other that is no longer substantial and maternal but symbolic. . . . What we have here is fusion . . . transposed from the mother's body to an invisible agency. . . . This is quite a wrench from the dependency of early childhood, and it must be said that it is a compromise solution, since the benefits of the new relationship of dependency are entirely of an imaginary order, in the realm of signs.[71]

A psychoanalytic approach to unitive experience is reductive, but it is not necessarily inconsistent with a negative theology. At no

point, negative theologies maintain, does any mystic have direct access to God, void, *'Ein Sof,* Ungrund, the unnameable Tao, or the like. Whatever can be experienced is necessarily not transcendent. Unitive experiences occur within the human person, and the reality that they concern is a human one. Union may access the ground of being, but it is the mystic's own personal being and not the being of all. As Martin Buber reflected:

> From my own unforgettable experience I know well that there is a state in which the bonds of the personal nature of life seem to have fallen away from us and we experience an undivided unity. But I do not know—what the soul willingly imagines and indeed is bound to imagine (mine too once did it)—that in this I had attained to a union with the primal being or the godhead. That is an exaggeration no longer permitted to the responsible understanding. Responsibly—that is, as a man holding his ground before reality—I can elicit from those experiences only that in them I reached an undifferentiable unity of myself without form or content. I may call this an original prebiographical unity and suppose that it is hidden unchanged beneath all biographical change, all development of the soul . . . existing but once, single, unique, irreducible, this creaturely one: one of the human souls and not the "soul of the All"; a defined and particular being and not "Being"; the creaturely basic unity of a creature.[72]

The psychic nature of unitive experiences is not inconsistent, however, with the proposition that they correspond to the reality of the cosmos. In the same way that Pythagoras's theorem is a mental computation that proceeds wholly within the mind, but happens, through the design of the cosmos, to correspond to the actual physical circumstances of objects that have the shapes of right triangles, so too some unitive experiences, rightly understood, may happen to correspond to the actual order of existence. It is only the collapse of this correspondence into an identity, the unfounded supposition that unitive experiences directly reveal what is necessarily the true order of being as such, that a psychoanalytic approach cannot accommodate.

I would further emphasize that my discussion of conscience as a natural faculty of the mind does not preclude the possibility of divine intervention within it, as within all else in the cosmos. Neither does my assertion that some manifestations of conscience are infantile in form, rather than mature, imply that infants have no access to divine providence.

Reification and Reality-Testing

One of the most spectacular aspects of the trance state is its effect on the sense of reality. Reality-testing is the capacity to decide whether a mental presentation represents a perceptible phenomenon or is intrapsychic alone (a memory, fantasy, concept, or the like). It is a basic function of the portion of the mind that psychoanalysis terms the ego. The sense of reality is also dependent, however, on the accumulated memory of past reality-testing. What reality has been found (or thought) to be in the past influences the reality-testing of the moment. Trance states may repress both aspects of the sense of reality, but they commence with reality-testing. Memories are inhibited only in advanced trances.

The repression of the ego's reality-testing function makes it impossible for the person in trance to determine whether mental presentations are nonrepresentational. By inhibiting reality-testing, trance serves to reify whatever may be its contents. Mental presentations are assumed to represent perceptible realities, whether they do or not. Daydreams, for example, are turned them into hallucinatory states that may seem subjectively to be extrasensory perceptions. Speculative ideas may receive apparent validation and become delusional certainties. Playacting may become a possession state.

Most religious doctrines accommodate the process of reification. The unwillingness of religions to come to agreement with physical science has generally its basis in fantasies that have been reified, sometimes by trance states, and otherwise by the weight of received tradition. Reified fantasies are scarcely less than a mystical stock-in-trade. Visions of ghosts have been endorsed by afterlife doctrines, celestial ascensions by accounts of divine abodes in heaven, and so forth.

In a few cases, the reification of fantasies by trance states is particularly noticeable because efforts have been made to struggle against it. In the Buddhist tantra of Tibet, novices are taught to meditate on topics whose very absurdity provides an object lesson of the illusory nature of the gods:

> The six syllables of the formula [*Aum mani padme hum*] are connected with the six classes of sentient beings and are related to one of the mystic colours as follows:
> *Aum* is white and connected with gods (lha).
> *Ma* is blue and connected with non-gods (lhamayin).

> *Ni* is yellow and connected with men (mi).
> *Pad* is green and connected with animals (tudo).
> *Me* is red and connected with non-men (Yidag or other mi-ma-yin).
> *Hum* is black and connected with dwellers in purgatories. . . .
>
> One identifies the six kinds of beings with the six syllables which are pictured in their respective colours. . . . They form a kind of chain without end that circulates through the body, carried on by the breath, entering through one nostril and going out through the other.
>
> As the concentration of mind becomes more perfect, one sees mentally the length of the chain increasing. Now when they go out with the expiration, the mystic syllables are carried far away, before being absorbed again with the next inspiration. Yet, the chain is not broken, it rather elongates like a rubber strap and always remains in touch with the man who meditates.
>
> Gradually, also, the shape of the Tibetan letters vanishes and those who "obtain the fruit" of the practice perceive the six syllables as six realms in which arise, move, enjoy, suffer and pass away the innumerable beings, belonging to the six species.
>
> And now it remains for the meditator to realize that the six realms (the whole Phenomenal world) are subjective: a mere creation of the mind which imagines them and into which they sink.[73]

Reification here proceeds along two lines. Tibetan tantrists are aware that their meditative states make their fantasies seem real. They deliberately cultivate absurd fantasies in order to promote belief in the fallacy of reality. They are unaware, however, of the reification present in their argument that the illusory nature of meditative experience proves the illusory nature of sense perception. The inference is not logical, but its reification during trance makes it seem certain.

Several of the medieval Bridal mystics of western Europe sought to experience allegorical visions, consistent with the texts of St. Hildegard of Bingen.[74] Their efforts met repeatedly with failure, however. The mystics were unable to sustain an allegorical point of view because their visions were invariably reified. The following example was reported by St. Gertrude of Helftha:

> On one occasion, when I assisted at a Mass at which I was to communicate, I perceived that Thou wert present, by an admirable condescension, and that Thou didst use this similitude to instruct